

Dalit Autobiography: A Study of Dalit Women's Autobiographies

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Abstract: *Autobiography is enjoyed as a literary genre all over the world. Its importance as a means of self-examination, self-creation and self-regeneration has been recognized by the critics and creative writers. Writing an autobiography is a Western tradition where people enjoy to celebrate the 'self' and they are eager to demonstrate their achievement. Indians have adopted this tradition of writing an autobiography from the West. Autobiography can be classified into two categories one as the life stories which inspires, stimulates and demonstrates personal achievements of an individual. Secondly, the life stories which not only demonstrates the saga of individual but also the society as a whole depicts sorrows, sufferings, subjugation and socio-economic conditions. Dalit autobiographies belongs to the second category. They have portrayed the socio-economic, cultural and political conditions of Dalit Community under the control and influence of Upper Caste Hindu society. Contemporary Indian Society was divided under the wrong notions of 'Purity and Pollution'. Dalits were treated as untouchables and polluters to the High Caste Hindus because they were born in the low caste. They were intentionally kept ignorant and denied to take education and asked to live out of town in separate colonies by high caste Hindus to safeguard their control over Dalits. Autobiography came handy to them to demonstrate their age-old suffering, exploitation, and maltreatment. Writers like Daya Pawar, Shankarrao Kharat, Bandu Tupe, P. E. Sonkamble, Shrankumar Limbale, Laxman Mane, Laxman Gaikwad, and Kishor Kale came forward and penned their experiences in the form of autobiographies. Like male autobiographies, female auto biographers like Baby Kamble, Urmila Pawar, Kumud Pawade, Janabai Girhe, Bama, demonstrated their life stories and experiences of trivial exploitation based on caste, class, and gender.*

Key Words: *Dalit, Patriarchy, Oppression, Discrimination, Sexuality, Caste Violence.*

1. INTRODUCTION: Dalit Literature:

Dalit literature being a new dimension is the primary concept the literature of marginality. It was emerged in the 1960s, starting with the Marathi language, and soon appeared in Hindi, Kannada, Telugu, Bangla, and Tamil languages, through narratives such as poems, short stories, and, most, autobiographies, which stood out due to their stark portrayal of reality and the Dalit political scene. The term "Dalit" was used for the first time by Mahatma Jyotirao Phule in the 19th century. Dalit literature in India over the past many decades has emerged as a separate and important category of literature in many Indian languages. It has provided a new voice and identity to the communities that have experienced discrimination, exploitation, and marginalization due to the hierarchical caste system. Dalit literature has also made a forceful case for human dignity and social equality. In the light of the growing importance of the study of Dalit literature, this paper attempts to explore the origin, concept, and contributions of Dalit literature in India and depiction of Anger and Agony in the writings of Tamil Dalit Writers

The word Dalit is derived from language and, etymologically, it means "ground", "suppressed", "crushed" or "broken to pieces". Hence, by connotation, the term Dalit is used as an adjective or noun to describe the people or communities that have remained down-trodden or at the margins of society throughout India's long social history. The word Dalit was also used later as a Hindi and Marathi translation of the official term "depressed classes" that the British government used to describe what is now called the Scheduled Castes.

2. History of Dalit Literature:

Though there have been several Dalit writers and poets during the medieval times in 11th-century Kannada poet Madara Chennaih, Dalit saint Kalavee, Sant Kabir and others, the modern movement for Dalit literature in India began from Maharashtra and in Marathi language in the 1960s when the Maharashtra Dalit Sahitya Sangh was established as an alternative platform to the mainstream Marathi literature. It was inspired by the ideology of Jyotiba Phule and Babasaheb Ambedkar. The movement of the African Americans led by Martin Luther King and activities of black panthers as also the "Little Magazine" movement as the voice of the marginalized proved to be a background trigger for resistance literature of Dalits in India. Even before the 1960s, writers like Baburao Bagul, Bandhu Madhav,

Shankarao Kharat, Narayan Surve, Anna Bhau Sathe were expressing Dalit concerns and issues in their literature. Baburao Bagul (1930–2008) is considered as a pioneer of Marathi Dalit writings in Marathi. His collection of short stories titled *Jevha MiJat Chorali* (When I Concealed My Caste) published in 1963 shook the traditional foundations of Marathi literature with its radical depiction of social exploitation. Subsequently, Namdeo Dhasal (who founded an organization called Dalit Panther) further consolidated and expanded the Dalit literature movement in India. Litterateurs like Laxman Gaekwad, Laxman Pawar, Daya Pawar, Waman Nimbalkar, Tryambak Sapkale, Arun Dangle, Umakant Randhir, J. V. Pawar, Tarachandra Khandekar, Yogiraj Waghmare, Avinash Dolas, Kishore Shantabai Kale, Narendra Jadhav, Yogendra Meshram, Bhimrao Shirvale, etc. became prominent voices of Dalit writing in Marathi. Many of the Dalit writings have also been translated into English and published as part of the anthologies of Dalit writings. The movement for Dalit literature has later spread to other languages like Gujarati, Kannad, Punjabi, Hindi, Malayalam, and Bengali. Dalit literature has used all literary forms – poetry, short stories, novels, plays and autobiographies in various languages. Nirav Patel, Joseph Makwan, Dalat Chauhan, Harish Mangalam, Mohan Parmar, B. N. Vankar, Yashwant Vaghela, Chandu Maheria, etc. in Gujarati, Bama in Tamil, Omprakash Valmiki in Hindi and many more have contributed to the Dalit literature.

3. Dalit Women's Autobiographies:

Dalit women's autobiographies reflect and discuss various socio-political-cultural issues about the Dalit community. There is no fictional motif in Dalit women's autobiographies. In the narratives of Dalit women the everyday is a very important theme. The day-today private life as depicted in the autobiographies reveals the dark side of a patriarchal structure. We get a woman's perspective on things—what makes her world, her take on societal evils and her anguish, hopes and fear and also a remembrance of the past.

Dalit men's autobiographies do not mention domestic violence. It is quite evident from Dalit women's autobiographies that this was a major issue among the women. Its complete dismissal in the men's narratives shows their apathy and the complete denial of violence at home. Dalit men like men of all classes and castes thus espouse the beating of wives and the general physical, mental and emotional trauma which the womenfolk have to bear within a household. The Dalit autobiographies are different not just because they reveal different experiences and different world-views but also because they unravel the bigger questions of memory, experience, gender relations and familial structures which are the same across all societies and classes. Unlike Dalit men, only a few Dalit women have written their autobiographies and most of them have been written in regional languages and that they have hardly been translated into English.

Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* (original *Jina Amucha* in Marathi, translated by Maya Pundit: 2009) is an autobiography of Baby Kamble but an entire community. *The Prisons We Broke* gives a shred of evidence for the Casteism in India. The fact that the caste system not only stigmatizes Dalits as untouchables because of their birth and forces them into dirty jobs, but also segregates a large chunk of the population as lower castes and also forces them into various menial jobs by their birth. Casteism has not just killed millions of Dalit but also destroyed generations of these enslaved people by keeping them away from civilization, development and social honour. Millions of people, for generation to generations together were reduced to a level much lower than dogs, cats, and rats. Casteism caused deaths of not only the body but also killed honour, self-pride and the living spirit of a whole race for hundreds of years. Casteism does not kill directly but kills the spirit and consciousness of a person or society. In the early decades of the 20th century, women's writings were regarded as a different form of literature by the male-centric society. The feminine narrative in autobiography raised a great controversy as the autobiography had been the monopoly of males till then. Writing autobiography requires certain potentialities. Depicting of individuality is the prerequisite of writing autobiographies.

The Prisons We Broke is an expression of protest against the inhuman conditions of existence to which the Hindu caste system has subjected the Dalit for thousands of years? She notes that after Phule and Shahu Maharaj, it was Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar who provided the intellectual and ideological foundations for a sustained critique of the caste system and that under the leadership of Dr. Ambedkar, Dalit protest acquired the form and force of a militant political movement and challenged the very foundations of Hinduism. Kamble raises certain important issues like caste discrimination, women subjugation and the influence of Dr. Ambedkar on Dalit women to get themselves educated both socially and culturally. Born to an industrial father, the author's —family background hardly keeps her above the miserable poverty. Her English speaking aajas or grandfathers were butlers to European sahibs. As she says: all the people of the maharwada were illiterate except for my aaja. Therefore, she has nothing much to suffer as her people suffer but she had experiences of her community her people who suffer a lot.

The narration deals with her family background, village customs like worshipping local deities, superstitions, Mahars and yeskar duties, school education, experiences of discrimination, marriage customs, experiences of new brides with their in-laws, cooking beef, Dalit culture, exploitation of the upper castes, the influence of movies, the influence of Buddha and finally the arrival of Dr. Ambedkar as Dalit messiah and Kamble's active involvement in

Ambedkar movement. The experience of insecurity is one of the major aspects of Kamble's autobiography. The position of Dalit women in a Dalit family, which is full of experiences charred by insecurity, domestic violence, and social violence, is an important theme in her autobiography. The patriarchal system in India made the Dalit women feel insecure and dependant on men.

In her autobiography, Baby Kamble presented the existing representation of Mahars life in the past 50 years living in Western Maharashtra. She bluntly illustrates her anger toward the Chaturvarna system of Hinduism as well as against the patriarchal order predominant among Mahars which gave a lower status to their women. The autobiography is a self-analysis of the patriarchy and superstition prevalent among Mahars. It is also a document which recorded the poverty and hunger of Mahars. The autobiography is a social critique of the Hindu Social system as well as the patriarchal order of Mahars. Baby Kamble's self and truthful analysis made her autobiography different from the autobiographies of higher caste women as well as Dalit male autobiographies where the presence of Dalit women as an independent human being rarely felt. Through her narration, Baby Kamble brings to the fore the plight of Dalit Women.

Shantabai Kamble's Majya Jalmachi Chittarkatha published as a complete book in 1986 but presented to readers and television audiences in serial form through the early 1980s is considered the first autobiographical narrative by Dalit woman writer. This book included in the University of Mumbai's syllabus. Shantabai Kamble, the first untouchable women to be appointed as a teacher in the district of Sholapur in 1942 is the most articulate in this regard in "The kaleidoscopic story of my life" 1986 in Marathi 'Majya Jalmachi Chittarkatha' literally means a picture story but also indicates a sense of pieces of pictures being put together like a puzzle. When she reaches the end of her narration and caste a distance glance on the memories laid down before her eyes she firmly attests that since the beginning and all along her life schooling alone saved her from hardships Kamble grew up when the Phule Ambedkarite movement was at its peak and she was exposed to it right from her childhood. She provides us a graphic account of what the life of the Mahars used to be like and how it changed due to Babasaheb Ambedkar. The Phule Ambedkarite movement made Kamble more conscious about her caste identity. She learns to question the deprivation that the Dalits have not only endured for ages but also regarded as their destiny. She acknowledges herself as a product of the Ambedkar movement. Kamble struggled to balance their private and public life she had lived in the same social structure of Hindu society in which woman is considered as subordinate to the husband. She was subjected for her husband's doubts. But her autobiography deals with grandparents, parents and her community people. The tone of the autobiography is egalitarian and it is not influenced by masculinity. The adversity is an equal challenge for wife and husband. Her autobiography deals with these two contradictory approaches for two religions in which the logical rationality, self-awareness and struggle for emancipation are important aspects. In short the basic difference between these two autobiographies is that the former finds romance and trill in the conversion whereas the later deals with the utter need of conversion as means of emancipation for each and every type of adversity in the life of downtrodden. Shantabai also recounts how being Mahar she and her community people were discriminated against by the upper castes.

Urmila Pawar is a literary personality, known for her short story writings in Marathi literature. She was born and brought up in the Kokan region of Maharashtra state. She was born in the year May 1945 at Adgaon village of Ratnagiri District. Today, she is known as a feminist writer and leader of the Women's lib movement. As a Dalit writer, she has established herself after Daya Pawar, Baby Kamble and Shantabai Gokhale as the prominent voice of Dalit literature. Her memoir 'Aaydan', which was published in the year 2003 and was translated by Dr. Maya Pandit as *The Weave of my life: A Dalit woman's Memoir*. 'Aaydan' is a weaving of basket by Burud community of Ratnagiri district. Even mahar people were busy in the weaving of basket before plastic entered in their lifestyle.

Pawar was much sensitive about her caste as well as her poverty so during the the school period onwards her conscious mind was aware of the limitations of the person of lower caste and meaning of poverty not described in the books, but reality. The other important reference about the community living and exploitation of the women is seen in their food preparations at home. It is very evident from the memoir that separate food preparations were done for men and women and particularly the daughter-in-law is exploited up to maximum level. Pawar as a feminist and as a Dalit woman has highlighted an issue. Pawar has given very minute details of oppression and exploitation of girl children and women. Sometimes the humiliation is so much that it is biting to the reader with his/her sensibility. The focus of Pawar's autobiography, however, is on the self. She talks about her personal life and her life experiences. Nevertheless, the community always looms large in her autobiography as well as in her fiction. The weave of memories thus documents a detailed narrative of how Dalit men, women, and children encountered modernity- the school, the city, the conjugal family, the bureaucracy, activism, literary societies, remuneration of a feudal religion-bringing in to focus new times and spaces. Pawar not only shares her tireless efforts to surmount hideous personal tragedy but also conveys the excitement of an awakening consciousness during a time of profound political and social change Pawar was much sensitive about her caste as well as her poverty so during the school period onwards her conscious mind was aware of the limitations of the person of lower caste and meaning of poverty not described in the

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Bama wrote Karukku 'to make sense of her life' says Lakshmi Holmstrom, who translated it from the original Tamil version. It is shaped by her quest for integrity as a Dalit and Christian. Although it is a narrative of the self-driven by the quest of the self, it fits into the larger contemporary debates within the Dalit movement—that of faith and identity. It challenges the notion of the Dalit woman within Dalits as well as non-Dalits. Bama, being a woman, does not fall within many of the ordinary categories and stereotypes for women—wife, mother, the sexualized women. She also skips from engaging in these in her autobiography. She hardly touches on the issues of Dalit women within and outside the household something that is marked in the Marathi Dalit autobiographies. The reasons for this could be many; maybe the relationships are egalitarian. The male members of her own family—brother and father—are based outside, studying and working in the army; her mother is the one who worked tirelessly and provided for them as the father's income would go in their education. However, she does touch upon the lives of other women around her- grandmothers are shown to work from dawn to dusk in the house of the upper-caste landlords; wife-beating by a neighbour is shown to be regular and something nobody meddles into. Bama's own childhood experience with boys is mixed with fun, competition and desires to be able to enjoy the same freedom that they do. The major emphasis in her narration is the crisis in her life around her faith and it is in this sense that her narration has a polemic 'unusual' and 'inadequate' Dalit woman only when we essentialize Dalit womanhood. That there is heterogeneity within Dalit women and it has to be acknowledged and engaged with by Dalit feminist is a crucial exposé.

In Bama's writing there is a quest for the meaning of religion—is it all rituals fulfilling what it claims to be, transformatory a path to God (something that we had earlier seen in our discussion on the autobiographical genre) as it is processed by the church and its various authorities. She turns to the scriptures to discover for herself the faith that she is born into, that is embraced by her family, to move out of the clutches of a social system that discredited them by religious sanctification and prohibition. At the crux of her narrative is the recognition of the divisive forces elemental in social life and in her own experience—religion (as she differentiates it from faith), caste, language, region, and gender. What it questions is the intolerance to difference and more brutally the intolerance of a faith that professes equality and tolerance. It is a crisis in her faith, a dilemma in her life. It is a tension between the professed and the reality.

4. CONCLUSION:

The above-mentioned Autobiographies the factual and very pitiable condition of Dalit women that they were victims of the caste system and also victims of being women in the male-dominated society. Women from the upper caste or lower caste there are some similarities that they have to suffer because of their gender. But it is very disgusting and pitiable that for the sake of some material gains humans had and have violating and exploiting human beings. We very proudly say that we are living in the age of information technology and in the age of globalization where we don't consider anybody inferior based on caste. Though the incidents of humiliation, marginalization, and exploitation are happening. Dr. Ambedkar has advised annihilating the caste for the overall growth of the society but in this age, we very proudly celebrates caste, class, and gender except vindicating them which is not in favor of the healthy society and humanism.

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